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National Safety Month: Ergonomics as risk management

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It might not be a well-known subject, but ergonomics — the study and prevention of work-related musculoskeletal disorders, or WMSD — is a guiding principle in everything the Army does, from equipment design to individual Soldier movement in everyday tasks.

It also should be a major part of every leader's safety and occupational health program, whether a field unit with Soldiers scattered across locations or a predominantly civilian organization with employees on a depot production line and everything in between.

"Ergonomics isn't flashy and it's not something many people give a lot of thought to," said Command Sgt. Maj. William L. Gardner II, U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center. "But it's incredibly important in keeping our Soldiers and workforce healthy and ready for not only today, but a long career as well."

According to John Pentikis, Ph.D., ergonomics branch chief and ergonomist Kelsey McCoskey, both of the Army Public Health Center at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland, WMSD risk factors include non-neutral postures, repetition, force, mechanical compression, duration, vibration and temperature extremes.

"Limiting exposure to these hazards reduces potential for worker fatigue, errors and unsafe acts and increases effectiveness and efficiency," Pentikis said. "This can be achieved by designing and modifying work environments through engineering and administrative controls. It's really about fitting the workstation to the worker."

Not doing so is costly. During 2018, 53 percent of Soldiers reported a new musculoskeletal injury, with 71 percent of those cases resulting from cumulative, micro-traumatic overuse, McCoskey said. The year prior, material handling was the No. 1 cause of civilian injury claims for Department of the Army civilians, outpacing slips, trips and falls and motor vehicle mishaps. Lower back disorders accounted for nearly half those cases.

"Even those who are physically fit may face undue risk of musculoskeletal discomfort and injury in physically demanding jobs," she said.

The single-most important mitigation measure leaders can take to help prevent these all-too-common disorders is relatively simple: commit to and maintain a functioning ergonomics program at all levels of management.

“It should be evident that safety, health and readiness are as important as production,” Pentikis said. “The easiest way to do this is to be involved in how people are working. Don’t assume just because the job is being done that it’s being done without harm.”

As a first step, leaders can engage their local safety office or unit safety professional for advice and input on establishing an ergonomics program. They may also reach the APHC via their website, <https://phc.amedd.army.mil>, to request an ergonomics consultation or assessment.

“An effective program means working safer and smarter, and the science of ergonomics is applicable both in garrison and deployed environments,” Pentikis said. “Whether you sit at a desk all day, provide medical care, pack parachutes or move inventory, ergonomic interventions can be a benefit.”

Finally, during this era of increased telework due to COVID-19, the APHC wants the Army to know it has its “backs, necks and wrists.” Pentikis and McCoskey offered the following home office ergonomics tips:

- Couches, beds and easy chairs promote non-neutral postures, and extended use could result in musculoskeletal discomfort.
- Use a good, supportive chair or sit on a pillow to act as both a seat cushion and booster for higher work surfaces such as kitchen tables, which are too high for computer work. Rolled towels may also be used for low back support.
- Remember the 90/90/90 rule: hips, knees and elbows at 90 degrees, and use a foot support to keep your feet from dangling.
- Use government-approved monitors, keyboards and mice, if available, rather than relying solely on a laptop.
- Stand up on conference calls to get your blood flowing.
- Take microbreaks throughout the workday to stand up, walk around and change position.

For more information on workplace safety, visit the USACRC website at <https://safety.army.mil>.

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Note: The USACRC will release one themed article and other media per week throughout the month of June in support of National Safety Month. Be sure to check the website regularly for updates.